

ECOSYSTEM

River's back to what it otter be

6-18-96

Furry critters return to Cache County watershed for first time since 1940s.

By Karl Cates

Deseret News staff writer

LOGAN — For the first time since the 1940s, river otters have taken up residency in the Bear River watershed of Cache County.

Considered a bellwether for riparian ecosystems, the once-indigenous aquatic mammals suggest a

recovery of a river environment that has been hampered in modern times by human encroachment.

"It tells us the river system is good today, there's a good supply of fish, the river is clean," said Boyde Blackwell, fur-bearer coordinator for the state's Division of Wildlife Resources.

State wildlife biologists say they're not sure where the otters came from.

Their presence had been suspected for some time, but the first

proof didn't surface until earlier this year when a local trapper found one drowned in an underwater beaver trap in the Spring Creek Wildlife Management Area on the Little Bear River just north of Wellsville. The animal was killed in a marshy lowland just south of Cutler Reservoir.

"It confirms a longtime belief, despite skepticism from some people, even within our own wildlife management system," said Jake Faibisch, a spokesman for the

division.

Otters are protected by state law, and wildlife managers for years have tried orchestrating an otter comeback after their population was decimated in the first half of the century by overtrapping and river damming. The animals are native to Utah, but for much of modern times they were found only in the very northwestern corner of the state, where Goose Creek and the Raft River drain into the Columbia River Basin, according to John Pratt, a Tremon-

ton-based conservation officer with the division.

In 1988, the state reintroduced 80 otters from Alaska and Nevada into the Colorado River Basin on the Green River south of Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area, where they have prospered.

Otters have since reappeared elsewhere to the west, including along spots on the Provo River, the Weber River and at Rockport Reservoir.

Faibisch said their reappearance in the Cache Valley is something of a puzzle.

"That's part of the mystery of the event . . . a lot of the surrounding systems are trapped out," said Faibisch.

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OTTERS

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Otter pups, however, have been known to migrate more than 100 miles from their place of birth, and those that apparently live now in the Cache Valley might have traveled south out of Idaho.

Faibisch said their presence is a welcome indicator of robust river ecosystems, but that they are tourist attractions as well, despite their shy nature.

"They're elusive when they

want to be," he said.

Though it is against state law to kill otters, a number of other fur-bearing animals are managed by division programs that permit their trapping.

Blackwell said between 1,200 and 1,400 trappers are licensed in Utah to take species that include red fox, skunk, raccoon, beaver, badgers and bobcats, the most commonly harvested of the lot.

Muskrats and mink — often mistaken for otters — can also be trapped under state-regulated programs.

settlement negotiations with the government, Judge J. Thomas Greene will hear the case beginning Friday.

Citing a confidentiality clause, neither the water district nor the attorney for the families would disclose the terms of the settlement. However, family attorney Robert S. Clark said he was "very pleased" with the settlement.

Water district officials have indicated their insurance company will cover the loss. They referred all other questions to their lawyer, Robert Wright, who was unavailable for comment Tuesday morning.

In 1993, they had an obligation to warn them of the release of a large amount of water from the water district's Kolob Reservoir.

The rising water caught the hikers in an extremely narrow area called Slot Canyon, sweeping them downstream. Ellis and Fleischer drowned, and the others were stranded for five days.

According to their families, the National Park Service was aware of the release of water but took no action to stop or warn the hikers even after group leaders repeatedly asked about water conditions. Their lawyers argued that policies

Christensen argued that while National Park Service policies establish a "general duty to promote safety," park rangers cannot be expected to inform millions of park visitors of "every conceivable hazard."

She also argued that if the government were held liable for all hazards in national parks, business "would come to a halt," Christensen said.

National groups that promote outdoor adventures have expressed similar concerns, saying an adverse ruling could lead to a ban or severe curtailment of such activities in the national parks.

His contributions to furniture design and architectural ornamentation became part of a uniquely Mormon style. He was a master of beehive and honeybee designs and the motifs show up in many of his works.

Still highly visible are such Ramsay works as the elegant casing of the Tabernacle Organ. Other or-

nately carved in historic bu-
own family h-
held in muse-
His design
pattern for ba-
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riod.

Ramsay and
in Salt Lake Va-
McArthur hand-
the first of its k-
1856. He had jo-
Church in 1849.
first job in his ne-

Ramsay said he left part of his heart in England when he emigrated to America," she said.

In 1872, Ramsay was called by Brigham Young to go to Richfield to help organize a United Order community. One of the things he took with him when he moved south was a bedstead on which he had been working for some-

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BANNER YEAR

Bear Lake's rising water